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ABSTRACT

Much of the variation in achievement in college classrooms can be eliminated through the use of cooperative learning groups similar to those that have been used successfully in the elementary school setting. The group succeeds when every member succeeds--success meaning mastery of the concept or problem being posed. Its use in reading methods classes increases overall student achievement of the subject and gives students a thorough knowledge of the methodology and management of cooperative groups through direct experience. The teacher's role in the use of such groups is to (1) determine the size of the cooperative learning groups, (2) randomly assign students to groups, (3) set the proper environment, (4) encourage participation of all group members, (5) provide assignments that have a clear goal structure, (6) create learning situations that promote a sense of positive interdependence, (7) monitor the groups and intervene when necessary, and (8) evaluate the learning by giving feedback about the quality of the work and by using a criterion-referenced evaluation system. Through the group process, students approach the actual teaching of children with more confidence--secure in the fact that not only the college instructor, but their peer group as well, is pulling for them and standing by to help with any problems that arise. (A sample plan for a cooperative learning group in a reading methods class is included.) (HOD)

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Cooperative Learning: An Innovative Approach to Teaching Reading Theory and Practice

Juanita Cox, Virginia Lyons, Virginia Poe

Learning for mastery in any instructional setting which involves large groups of learners always requires decisions about teaching methodology. In the college setting where students exhibit vast differences in achievement and experiential background there has been a tradition of belief in the "normal curve" - the best students will pass, the worst will fail.

In a teacher training program, even though students often pass through a strenuous screening and admittance process, individual differences and experiences still pose a problem to the college instructor. Many college instructors today - especially in the specific field of reading - have begun to believe in the mastery learning concept. Every student, if we teach well, should be able to learn what we have to teach. To the university professor in a teacher training program, it is also compelling to set an example - we must model those instructional methods we want our students to put into practice when they move from the pre-service to actual classroom teaching.

Although grouping has long been used as an effective method of instruction at the elementary and secondary school level, most traditional college classrooms have used lecture combined with class discussions. In this type of setting, every learner more or less "sinks or swims" on the basis of what he can absorb through listening, taking notes, or the completion of outside assignments. This often results in a wide variation in achievement.

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Much of this variation in achievement in the college classroom can be eliminated through the use of cooperative learning groups similar to those which have been used successfully in the elementary school setting. The group succeeds when every member succeeds - success meaning mastery of the concept or problem being posed. The group porcess can solve the problem of lack of experiential background, the need for clarification, a chance for verbalizing in a non-threatening setting, and much needed repetition for the slower student.

Although cooperative learning groups have been used in the majority of our reading methods courses at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, they have been particularly helpful in our combined reading theory/practicum block. Mastery of the material by all students in a strict time frame is essential before the practicum with children begins, and the group process ensures that weaker students are able to achieve critical subject matter along with the more experienced ones. Although still in the "infant stage" of implementing cooperative groups in this setting, we have found that the method works well with the lower level skills such as rote learning of phonic elements, as well as the higher level skills of decision making and evaluation.

The professional literature has given much attention to the description and basic function of cooperative groups. We found the structure used by Johnson and Johnson (1975), Lyons (1982) and Lyons (1980) most useful, and a brief summary of their description of the teacher's role in cooperative learning follows. In addition, a sample plan for a cooperative learning group in a reading methods class is included.

Teacher's Role in Cooperative Learning

1. Determining the Size of the Cooperative Learning Groups. To determine the appropriate size of the cooperative learning groups four variables must be considered. They are (1) the amount of resources needed for the lesson, (2) the levels of social skill development of the students, (3) the nature of the task, and (4) the amount of time available to complete the task.

2. Assignment of Students to Groups. Unless there is a particular reason for forming homogeneous groups, students should be randomly assigned to groups to ensure heterogeneity. Heterogeneous grouping can also be done by giving students a pretest over the content material to be mastered and then assigning students according to their test scores. For example, a group that has one student with a high score, two students with medium scores, and one student with a low score would be a good heterogeneous group for a cooperative learning lesson.

3. Setting the Proper Environment. Setting an atmosphere conducive to cooperative learning requires arranging the room in such a way that the group clusters do not interfere with each other's learning. The students in each group should have easy access to materials and be able to converse comfortably with each other without disturbing the other groups.

4. Participation of all Group Members. A method for encouraging all group members to participate in discussions is termed "shared diversity" which is like a jig-saw puzzle with each group member having one piece of the puzzle.

This shared diversity can be accomplished by giving students different materials on the same topic which they must share with each other. All group members then are responsible for contributing their information, their piece of the puzzle, and seeing that this information is incorporated into the group report.

5. Clear Goal Structure. A successful cooperative learning experience is dependent upon assignments which have a clear goal structure. The teacher must be explicit in defining the task so that the students know whether they are to compete, work cooperatively, or work in an individualistic manner. For example, if the task requires a test of how much each student knows about phonics, it would have an individualistic structure. If the task is one of problem-solving which requires a group consensus, then the goal structure is cooperative.

6. Promoting Positive Interdependence. "The essence of cooperative groups is the condition of interdependence." (Lyons 1980, preface). Therefore, the sixth step is to create learning situations which promote a sense of positive interdependence. This can be done through the use of jig-sawing material or giving group grades in which better students must assist weaker students.

7. Monitoring the Learning. A plan for monitoring learning must be carefully developed through the use of observers and structured observation checklists. Just telling students to work collaboratively does not ensure that they will do so. Therefore, teachers must monitor the groups and intervene when necessary. Student observers are used to determine how much and how well each group member

collaborates. The observers are taught how to do the observing and are supplied with a checklist that clearly tells them what criteria to use.

8. Evaluation. Evaluating the learning can be done by giving feedback about the quality of the work and by using a criterion-referenced evaluation system. Trained student observers assist in the evaluation of the groups and the individuals within the group. Final evaluation is the assigning of grades by the teacher which may be an individual or group letter (or percentage) grade.

A sample lesson plan which incorporates these eight steps follows. This is one of several plans which has been used successfully in a reading methods practicum for undergraduates at our university.

Sample Lesson Plan.

BEFORE THE LESSON

Appropriate Reading Methods Class

graduate or undergraduate developmental reading
graduate or undergraduate remedial or diagnostic/prescriptive
undergraduate practicum in developmental reading

Subject Area:

comprehension

Goal

to provide practice in teaching comprehension of details, main ideas, drawing conclusions, and making judgments

Group Size

3 to 5 students

Time Required

either one 90 minute class or two 45 minute classes

Materials

Item	Number Needed
overhead projector	one per room
non-permanent markers	one per group
large chart paper	one per group
a xeroxed (or dittoed) passage suitable for determining:	
main idea	one per student in each group
getting facts	
drawing conclusions	
making judgments	
a transparency of each of the above passages	one per group
a resource textbook on teaching comprehension skills (this can be the student's text for the course)	one or two per group

THE LESSON

Procedure

1. Instructional Objectives
   A. Students will prepare a short lesson on how to increase children's comprehension of a specific passage.
   B. Students will prepare visual aids to go with their comprehension instruction.
   C. Students will explain their comprehension strategies to other groups in the classroom.
   D. Students will work cooperatively to prepare their comprehension lesson.
2. Group Size

   3 to 5 students per group of various abilities

3. Assigning students to groups

The teacher will assign students to the groups, insuring that each group has a balance of heterogeneity (including ability as well as experience in teaching if possible).

4. Classroom Arrangement

Groups will be arranged with members in close contact and facing each other.

5. Explaining the Learning Task

The teacher will distribute a different comprehension passage (dittos and transparency) to each group (i.e., a worksheet taken from Barnell Loft's Getting the Main Idea will be given to group 1, a passage from Drawing Conclusions will be given to group 2, etc.). The group will be told that their task is to structure a set of direct teaching steps to increase children's comprehension of this and similar passages.

The student will be encouraged to problem solve using previous lecture notes, a chapter read the week before in their textbook, or other available resources. In addition to deciding on the best teaching strategy, they will also be instructed to prepare appropriate visual highlighting or aids to accompany their verbal explanations.

After the comprehension strategies are decided upon, the group will choose one person to do the visual highlighting, and one person to present their strategies to the other classmates when completed. An overhead transparency will be available for the group's use, as well as marking pens and chart paper.

6. Explaining the Goal Structure

Each group is expected to utilize the ideas of their members to prepare an effective comprehension lesson based on a specific goal. In addition to a verbal explanation of their lesson, the group must agree on and prepare visual aids or highlighting using available media.

Since comprehension is one of the most difficult reading skills to teach, it will be emphasized to each group that individual members must offer opinions as well as help to

evaluate the ideas that are presented. The group must agree on the best teaching strategies to use, as well as the best way to visually illustrate the lesson.

7. Criteria for Evaluation

A group lesson which is completed and shared with the class will receive a grade of satisfactory. Since this is the student's first attempt at preparing a lesson on comprehension, there will be no attempt to assign individual or group letter (or percentage) grades.

8. Observers and Observation Sheet

The teacher will be observing the groups. A checklist will be kept which will indicate if all members of a group are participating in the lesson by contributing ideas as well as evaluating, clarifying, praising, and summarizing the ideas of others.

DURING THE LESSON

Monitoring

During this lesson the teacher will walk around observing the progress of the groups, answering any questions which the group members are having trouble with, and serving as a resource person if needed.

AFTER THE LESSON

Processing the Interaction in the Groups

The teacher will make comments about behaviors observed during the lesson which contributed to the effectiveness of the group product. The students will also be asked to comment on how they felt cooperating together helped them to produce a better lesson.

In summary, we have found that the use of cooperative learning groups in our reading methods classes have served a dual purpose:

a) to increase overall student achievement of the subject

b) to give students a thorough knowledge of the methodology and management of cooperative groups through direct experience

And, finally, we have found our students approaching the actual teaching of children with more confidence - secure in the fact that not only the college instructor, but their peer group as well, is pulling for them and standing by to help with any problems that arise.

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